

# American Syndicalism and Problems of Communism

By JAMES P. CANNON

The following is the introduction by comrade Cannon to the pamphlet coming off the press this week by Leon Trotsky on "Communism and Syndicalism". Price 15 cents a copy, 10 cents in bundles.

The arguments brought forward in this pamphlet are devoted specifically to the problems of the labor movement of France, the classic land of syndicalism. But dealing as they do with such fundamental questions as the rôle of the revolutionary workers' party, the state, the bureaucracy in the labor movement and trade union tactics in general, they have universal application. This is particularly true of America. The historical development of the revolutionary labor movement in the United States has posed the question of syndicalism in its specific American form (the I. W. W.) with especial prominence. The task of assembling the revolutionary elements in the working class into a single body has been greatly hampered by theoretical confusion on the issues which the author illuminates in these pages. Some of these losses are irretrievable, for neither movements nor their participants can stand on one spot. Degeneration is the unfailing price for failure to develop and advance. In the period since the war we have seen not a little of this degeneration in the class conscious workers, and precisely for this reason. Much can yet be gained, however, by a clarification of the questions. This pamphlet, so sharp and clear in its reasoning, so fortified in every line by the tested theory of Marxism, can justly be called a timely and significant contribution to this work of clarification. For that reason we believe it deserves the particular attention of the American revolutionaries.

## THE I. W. W. AS A REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT

In the decade before the world war the proletarian revolt against the parliamentary reformism of the Socialist Party and the sectarian sterility and legalism of the Socialist Labor Party found two main points of crystallization. One of these was the Left wing in the S. P. The other was the I. W. W. Both of these movements had elements of a revolutionary party. The task of Communism in America was to unite them into a single revolutionary organization. To the failure to understand this task, and consequently the failure to accomplish it to any appreciable degree, we owe not a little of the weakness of the American Communist movement. A large share of the responsibility for this belongs to the party itself. It could not see the revolutionary implications of the I. W. W. movement and did not know how to mature and assimilate them. But this fact does not absolve the revolutionary syndicalists from responsibility. They contributed more than a generous measure of prejudice and dogmatism to the issue. If the party walked blindfolded the I. W. W. militants, for the greater part, put stumbling blocks in its path.

In its essence the pre-war I. W. W. was a variant of French syndicalism. Its distinctive features were its centralized form of organization and its indifference toward the syndicalist theory of the rôle of the "militant minority".

In its struggle against parliamentary reformism and legalism the I. W. W. introduced and popularized a number of ideas and practices of a decidedly progressive and revolutionary character, ideas which retain their validity today. Its emphasis on "direct action" was an anticipation, incomplete it is true, of the Bolshevik principle which puts the mass action of the workers above parliamentary activity. Its advocacy of industrial as against craft unionism prepared the way for modern organization of the workers. Another progressive feature was the emphasis the I. W. W. placed on the unskilled—the most deprived and exploited, the most numerous and potentially the most revolutionary section of the working class. From its first convention onward it declared solidarity with the Negro and welcomed him into its ranks. The members of the I. W. W. went through a number of historic class battles and displayed unexampled militancy and sacrifice. Solidarity with all struggling workers everywhere and an unceasing emphasis on the revolutionary goal of the struggle were central features in all of its activity.

These aspects of the I. W. W. were its strong, progressive and revolutionary side. That it represented, as did revolutionary syndicalism in general, a step forward from parliamentary socialism was acknowledged by the theses of the second congress of the Communist International. That it occupied a place in the vanguard of the American working class was attested by the fierce persecution launched against it. Particularly during the war the attacks of the govern-

ment were concentrated on the I. W. W. The significance of the war-time persecution consisted in the fact that it was led by the Federal government, as distinguished from the customary local persecutions arising out of purely economic strikes. This persecution had a national, political character, an acknowledgment in itself that the I. W. W. was no more a trade union but a revolutionary, and therefore a political force.

The weak side of the I. W. W. movement, as of the syndicalist movement on an international scale, was its theoretical incompleteness. Because of its indifference to revolutionary theory it did not and could not pose the fundamental questions of the revolution in their full implications and find the answer to them. As a consequence the movement contained a contradiction within itself. There cannot be a really revolutionary movement without a revolutionary theory, as Lenin said long ago. The conditions of the war sharpened the class relations to an extraordinary degree and exposed this contradiction with shattering force. The negative attitude toward the state—the ostrich policy of "ignoring" the state—disarmed the movement when this same state—the "executive committee of the capitalist class" and "its special body of armed men" was hurled against it. The proletarian reaction against parliamentary reformism, developing into opposition to "Politics" and indifference to political questions in general, left the I. W. W. without a compass before the complicated problems of war, problems which in their very essence were political to the highest degree. The justifiable hostility to bourgeois and reformist parties grew, as a result of loose thought, into an opposition to the concept even of a proletarian revolutionary party. This was the crowning theoretical error of the movement of American syndicalism, or industrialism. It prevented the conscious organization of the proletarian vanguard into a single uniform body able to work out the program of the revolution and strive for its application with united force.

## THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE I. W. W.

The experiences of the war and the Russian revolution disclosed the shortcomings of the I. W. W. as well as those of the Left wing in the S. P. The problems elucidated in the living experience of the Russian revolution became, as they remain to this very day, the touchstone for revolutionary organizations throughout the world. The Marxist teachings on the party and on the rôle of the workers' party as the vanguard of the class, without which the class cannot raise itself to power, received brilliant and irrefutable confirmation in the Bolshevik revolution. Adjustment to these lessons taught by life could not be evaded.

In the failure to make this adjustment is written the whole story of the post-war degeneration of the I. W. W. The record of this entire period is a record of the steady and systematic displacement of the I. W. W. from its old position in the vanguard of the struggle; of its transformation into the antipode of its former revolutionary self. Insofar as the upper and official stratum of the organization is concerned the keynote of anti-capitalism sounded in the best days has been transformed into anti-Communism. Out of a militant body of revolutionaries they strive to make reactionary sect.

"No politics" and "no party"—these are the formulae under which this degeneration has proceeded. And together with them has gone the slogan of "no leaders"—that slogan of demagogues who themselves aspire to leadership without qualifications. As has been remarked before, the leadership of the Communist party contributed to the tragic failure to build the new Communist movement in part on the foundations of the militant I. W. W. Intellectualism, condescension, the control and command sickness, played here, as always, an evil rôle. It is necessary to understand this and to say it plainly. But an understanding and acknowledgment of this fact cannot undo the past. We must start from where we are. If we bear in mind the mistakes of the past in order to avoid them, in the future something can yet be done of positive value for the revolution. It is not too late even now to make a place for those syndicalist workers who are imbued with a hatred of capitalism and the will to struggle against it—and there are many of them—under the Communist banner. It is quite true that the official party leadership is unable to do this, as it is unable to solve any of the problems of Communism. All the greater, therefore, is the responsibility of the Opposition.

In the ranks of the former members and sympathizers of the I. W. W., and to a lesser extent within the organization, are experienced militants who have not forgotten the old tradition, whose concepts do not begin and end with the phobia against Communism. Their spirit is alien to the spirit of the Gahans and Sandgrens. They are sympathetic to the Russian revolution and to Communism. Only they have no faith in the party. Their skepticism about the American Communist party has had a certain amount of justification, as we have always known. But, granting serious defects in the party, what is to be done about it? As we see the thing—since we proceed from the point of view that a party cannot be dispensed with—one must either struggle to reform the party or, if he thinks it is hopeless, form a new one. We, the Opposition, have taken the former course. The great mass of the radical workers who have lost faith in the dogmas of the I. W. W. without acquiring confidence in the party have fallen into passivity. The post-war prosperity, which depressed the entire labor movement to a low point, facilitated this passive attitude. "Nothing is happening. Let us wait and see," became a sort of platform for many during this period. People who had been concerned with the problem of making a revolution turned to the problem of making a living while awaiting further developments.

## TASKS OF MARXISTS

But what now? The economic crisis is smashing all this calm routine. Class relations are being sharpened and the conditions are being created for a revival of the militant labor movement. What path will this movement take and what part will be played by those who consider themselves to be revolutionaries? This question calls for an answer. In any case it can not be answered with a waiting, or passive attitude. A time of storm, and that is what is before us, above all is a time when nobody can stand aside; that is, nobody who doesn't want to play the part of a reactionary. Revolutionary health requires exercise.

## Lovestone and Brandler

The Revolutionary Age (No. 10), gives us a brief summary of the international conference of the Right wing Opposition groups recently held in Berlin. What actually took place at this conference, its political significance for the movement, and the future of the Right wing, we will still take occasion to elaborate upon in future issues of the Militant. Here it is interesting to make a remark or two on an instructive phase of the Lovestone group's participation.

The leading spirits at the Right wing conference were the heads of the opportunist Brandler group in Germany. In his report, Lovestone refers to this and similar groups in Europe as the "healthy . . . forces marshalled under our banner in the determined struggle to bring back the world party of Communism to the line and policies of Lenin". Other laudatory observations on the pristine Bolshevik purity of the Brandler group have been published in the Right wing paper for some time now.

Exactly on what date Lovestone discovered the virtues of the Lovestone group—especially the fantastic idea that they were fighting for Leninism—it is difficult to say. All that written records can establish is that Lovestone since 1924, fulfilled against the Brandler group as a hopelessly opportunist, Right wing faction. To a certain extent, the Lovestone group in the party built its reputation as fully-blown "Leninist" of the Stalin-Zinoviev-Bucharin era, upon its attacks on Brandler and Thalheimer. In fact, one of its main cards against the party minority in those days was an open or veiled accusation that it was somehow or other connected up with Brandler.

Less than two years ago on the eve of his expulsion from the party and directly afterwards, Lovestone still sailed under the flag of anti-Brandlerism. Startling as it may seem today, one of Lovestone's main points against those in his group who had turned against him (Bedacht) was that the latter had been entertaining ideas of connecting with Brandler—something which Lovestone, of course, indignantly "rejected". Here is what he wrote in his "Appeal to the Comintern" issued to the party:

"We do not believe that the Communist International will be fooled by the fraudulent [so!] accusation of Bedacht against comrades Gitlow, Lovestone, Wolfe, that they proposed to establish relations

in such a moment as the present one—which is a time of preparation for the great days impending—it is good to shake the advanced sections of the labor movement with discussion. And it is doubly fortunate if the discussion is precipitated by an objective Marxist analysis which, at the very beginning, lifts the fundamental questions to the high level of theoretical consideration. Such a service is rendered to the American movement by comrade Trotsky in the collection of articles which this pamphlet comprises. We have no doubt that it will make its way and be the means of strengthening the current of Communism in the resurgent labor movement of America.

This pamphlet is composed of a collection of articles written by comrade Trotsky at various times on the problems of the French labor movement. The first articles were written in the early part of 1923 after Monatte, the leader of the revolutionary syndicalists, and the group associated with him had just entered the Communist party of France. The two articles written toward the end of 1929 take up the discussion again after the intervening period of more than six years—a period in which Monatte had steadily retreated to his old position and consequently widened the chasm between him and the Communists.

The following article, entitled "Monatte Crosses the Rubicon", written at the end of 1930 draws a balance to the discussion with the syndicalists who had crowned their reactionary trend by a bloc with Dumoulin. Dumoulin is one of the prominent leaders of the C. G. T., the reformist general labor federation. Once a syndicalist of the "Left", he betrayed the movement and took a leading part in the expulsion of the revolutionary wing of the C. G. T. which resulted in a split and the formation of a rival general Federation in 1921. Now he is talking "Left" again and this serves as the cover for the passage of Monatte into the camp of reaction through the medium of a bloc with him.

The final article in the pamphlet deals with questions of Communist policy in the trade unions which are at present the subject of discussion in the French section of the International Left Opposition.

with Brandler and Thalheimer. The party records will show that it was over the protests of both Bedacht and Foster that the first resolution against Brandler and Thalheimer was adopted by the American Political Committee. Furthermore it was Bedacht who proposed in Moscow to comrades Gitlow, Lovestone and Wolfe to establish connections with Brandler and to keep a permanent representative in Berlin. This was instantly rejected by the comrades and it comes with bad grace from Bedacht to try to ascribe his proposals to others. When he is making his confessions, it would be well for him to confess his own errors in place of ascribing them to others who did not share them." (Emphasis in original.)

As to Bedacht, we have no special reason to doubt the charges made by Lovestone especially since Bedacht is spiritually closer to the solid social democratic school of Brandler than would appear on the surface today. But what about Lovestone? What feats have Brandler and Thalheimer performed since the above was written to cause such a violent somersault in political position on Lovestone's part? The answer is not far to seek: just as water finally finds its level, so the Lovestones, for all their temporary diversions into other streams, finally find their Brandlers and the Brandlers find their Lovestones.

What is particularly instructive here is the method of the Right wing—an inherent characteristic of their whole political course. Lovestone pulled a number of Communist workers out of the party under a barrage of attack upon Brandler. He never unfolded to them his opportunist platform in full, that is, he simply adopted the classic method of every opportunist misleader. Little by little, with a measure of skill, no doubt, he led them imperceptibly into the camp of Brandler. Substitute "Muste" for "Brandler" and you get the same result: for he roared against "Muste, the social reformist" when he left the party with a fury excelled only by the softness with which he casts a coy and desirous eye in the direction of "Muste, the honorable progressive" today. Lovestone could never have hoped to get even the support he did get in the party, by presenting his real platform in advance and he knew it. And he has not yet presented it in full. The depths of the swamp at which he will come to rest have not yet been reached.